In a showdown between health and education, health triumphs. Children must be healthy — and in class — to succeed in school. “Daily attendance is challenging for students from families who lack access to primary health care, especially if children or family members have chronic health issues that go untreated,” said Ruthann Melancon ’74 G’76, principal of Elm Park Community School in Worcester.

Healthy children from healthy families are more likely to stay in school, to lead more productive lives, to live longer, and to give back to their communities. Keeping children healthy and in school, and providing access to primary health care for their families are overarching goals that Melancon has long shared with another Assumption alumna, Frances Anthes ’73. Both women are fully invested, professionally and personally, in the educational and health care issues that affect children and families. The principal and the family health administrator agree that identifying and removing obstacles to high-quality health care for families are critical first steps toward success in school — and in life.

Anthes and Melancon have been leading change since they arrived at Assumption in the late 1960s. Anthes joined the first class of women admitted to the previously all-male school; Melancon arrived a year later, the first in her family to attend college. During their four years on campus, they developed a great affection for Worcester. They both called it “home” after graduation.
Nearly 35 years later, the two alumnae are still in Worcester, and leveraging their positions of leadership to improve access to education and health care for children and families at risk. In 1997, Anthes was named president and chief executive officer of Family Health Center of Worcester (FHC), incorporated in 1972 to improve the health and well-being of traditionally underserved and culturally diverse Worcester area residents. She oversees a staff of more than 250 employees who deliver high-quality primary health care and social services in Worcester’s inner-city neighborhoods, home to minority and refugee populations, college students, low-income families, homeowners, and homeless persons living in temporary shelters. Like many of her employees, Anthes lives in one of the neighborhoods FHC serves. Her three children attended Elm Park Community School.

**MELANCON, WHO EARNED A MASTER’S DEGREE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AT ASSUMPTION,** is in her twelfth year as principal of Elm Park Community School and nearing completion in a Ph.D. program at Lesley University. She and Anthes have interacted over the years as they built coalitions and advocated on behalf of their respective stakeholders—health care clients and public school students. More recently Melancon and Anthes joined forces to establish the state’s first school-based health care center that offers health services to the community it serves during after-school hours.

The opening of the Helen A. Bowditch Health Center at Elm Park Community School in June was a dream come true for Melancon. In addition to offering primary care to her students, the center extends health care services two evenings a week to school families and other residents in the Elm Park neighborhood. Named for the late Helen A. Bowditch, a civic leader and former school committee member, the school-based health center is a model for preventive and wellness-oriented health care. It enables patients to manage chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, asthma, and cardiovascular disease, without leaving the neighborhood. Easy access to the center’s services should result in fewer hospitalizations and emergency room visits for the school’s families. The school-based health center’s proximity and extended hours promise healthier children, who stay in school, as well as healthier families and neighbors in the Elm Park community.

Anthes and Melancon’s paths did not cross often on the Assumption campus, where Anthes majored in English with an interest in teaching, and Melancon concentrated on psychology with an eye toward pre-med studies. Within the Worcester community, the women have been on parallel trajectories throughout their professional lives, often meeting at the intersection of education and health care.

“I knew Ruthann from Worcester,” Anthes said. “My children attended Elm Park Community School, but they graduated before she became principal. When the school said it wanted a family health center, I thought, ‘What about the community?’ If you have the resources and the community has the need, then you need to work together.”

Elm Park Community School enrolls more than 400 students from one of the most financially disadvantaged, diverse, and densely populated neighborhoods in Worcester. Given its highly mobile population, the school suffers a high rate of student turnover and absenteeism. Anthes and Melancon saw the school as the ideal location for Worcester’s 14th school-based health center, and the state’s first school-based health center to remain open to the community after school hours.

“I knew Fran from Assumption, but we were in different classes and involved in different areas,” Melancon said. “Periodically, we saw each other through our connections to Worcester organizations. Then this opportunity came up for the community health center at the school. It has been fun to work with Fran and Family Health Center on this project that has grown from a seed of an idea. I’m not one to wait if there is a need and neither is Fran.”

Once they had the approval from the Worcester School Committee, their tenacity and track records as advocates for the disadvantaged helped them to secure the nearly $300,000 needed to renovate, equip, and furnish space within the school for the new community health center. Support from local foundations and a $100,000 matching gift challenge from an anonymous donor helped them to jumpstart the fund-raising effort.

“Our school has constant activity,” Melancon said. “We’re always open—from breakfast for our students, to adult classes in the evening, to summer programs. A health center makes sense here. Health has always been an interest of mine. I believe we need something to help young people explore their health. What hap-
Anthes, a Licensed Social Worker Who Earned a Master’s Degree in Social Work

At the University of Connecticut (UConn), joined Family Health Center in 1991. In addition to her responsibilities as FHC president and CEO, she also lectures and serves as an advisor for graduate students in social work at UConn, and works with family practice residents at UMass Medical School. In addition, she is active on a variety of advisory boards, task forces, and committees in service to the local and statewide communities. Called a “woman of vision,” when she received the Katharine F. Erskine Award (Medicine & Science) in 1998, Anthes has been recognized frequently for her community service activities. Twice she has been Assumption’s Honors Convocation speaker. The College’s Alumni Association honored her with the Fr. Louis Dion, A.A. ’35 Outstanding Achievement Award in 1998.

Melancon, also an Erskine Award holder, has been described as a “role model every day.” With her background in special education, she is ever-vigilant about identifying obstacles to inclusiveness within her school community. Personal health and family well-being surfaced as obvious barriers to school attendance at Elm Park Community School. “I always ask myself what is keeping this child from fully participating in this school community?” Melancon said. “What does this child need from us? What has to change? My focus is on facilitating organizational change—that’s been my life.”

Growing up as a self-described “Coast Guard brat,” Melancon’s family moved often. She was “the new kid in school” in four states—and in Greece—before finally settling back in Connecticut. “Those experiences made a difference in who I am,” she said. “I came to Assumption because I was looking for a small school. I was interested in math and science with particular interest in pre-med and psychology. When I visited the Assumption campus, I felt comfortable there—felt at home. Even at Assumption, I was identifying needs, like a darkroom and a new way to get student IDs made without the long lines. I was bold enough to talk to the president about these needs and he agreed to provide them. I stayed in Worcester after graduation. It’s a small city, close enough to my family.”

Anthes, who came to Assumption from suburban New Jersey, said the College gave her an opportunity to explore the issues of the day, like civil rights and the Vietnam War. “It was a nurturing and stimulating environment,” she said. “I left Assumption with a desire to contribute to the rest of the world. When I was asked to speak to the Women’s Studies Department in March, it made me reflect on where I’ve come from. There’s real value to work—to good work that feels like you’re contributing. I left Assumption with that value. The College played an important role in where I am today.”

Today, Anthes is playing an important role in the health and well-being of the Worcester community and beyond. She believes that health care is about informed and empowered consumers. “There are not enough hours in the day for her to accomplish all that needs to be done on their behalf. "Some days are too full," Anthes said. "The work is varied, interesting, energizing. The amazing thing about working in health care is that you’re making a difference in people’s lives. The Helen Bowditch Center is a new model for health care in the Commonwealth, and Worcester is leading the way.”

With the opening of the Helen A. Bowditch Health Center at Elm Park Community School, Anthes and Melancon are still identifying needs, and still leading change in the delivery of health care and education for those in the Worcester community most in need of the important work they continue to do on behalf of others.